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Chapter Author(s): Liz Kelly, Maria José Magalhães, Thomas Meysen and Maria Garner

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SECTION THREE

KEY ISSUES IN INTERVENTION

Chapter 8

The contested concept of culture: encounters in policy and practice on violence and abuse

Liz Kelly¹, Maria José Magalhães², Thomas Meysen³ & Maria Garner¹

¹ Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit, London Metropolitan University, UK

² Faculty of Psychology and Sciences of Education (FPCE), University of Porto; Interdisciplinary Centre for Gender Studies (CIEG)

³ SOCLES International Centre for Socio-Legal Studies, Heidelberg, Germany

As our research was part of a programme on “cultural encounters” the concept of culture has been central to our work, explored through both the histories of, and variations in, intervention cultures across our four countries but crucially through reflecting on the experiences of women and children from minoritised communities.

1 A conceptual framework

The CEINAV project explored both the intersections (and at times, collisions) across national legal and institutional cultures in the search for common European standards, and the growing diversity within European countries, where symbolic boundaries of cultural belonging, while constantly “under construction”, also define realities of social exclusion and inclusion. One of the starting points was that culture “is thus what allows us to perceive the world as meaningful and coherent and at the same time it operates as a constraint on our understandings and activities” (Säljö 1991, p. 180). Our study took place at a particular time, within specific historical and national contexts, so it reflects the intersections and contradictions that exist in the four countries in the early 21st century. Our research was carried out before the sustained inflow of refugees and migrants over the years 2015 and 2016 met a political response framing migration as an issue of national security, and thus does not reflect the impact of this securitisation process.

Culture cannot be seen as static and homogenous, but rather as a complex and polysemous concept, in the sense that it has strong connections for some social groups with different and additional meanings that reflect social and power tensions. Culture can be seen as a political arena, both within academia and politics, but it is also a battleground, open to assignment of new meanings. It is attributed to dominant groups and the elite (through art and sophistication) and, at the same time, to marginalised groups (through markers of difference). As researchers, we believe that the concept of culture has to be carefully considered, that we need to guard against crystallising groups and people as homogenous – be this professionals, Roma people, recent migrants or citizens with Asian or African heritage.

Modernity, colonialism and anthropological research contributed to shaping culture into something exotic, sometimes alien to a default white European norm. We prefer to think about culture as something that happens in our daily lives, as social practice (Thompson 1968). Understanding culture as social practice means bringing into consideration language and speech (as in the professionals' discourses from the project), but also politics and religion. None of these aspects can be separated, "[r]eligious dogmas, economic practices and politics do not stay dammed up in neat separate little ponds but they overflow their supposed boundaries and their waters mingle inextricably one with the other" (Benedit 1989, p. 12–13).

Viewing culture as social practice also offers the possibility of understanding how power relations translate to different cultural constructions (Willis 1978; McRobbie 1991). People from marginalised groups create their (daily) culture as a form of resistance, a counterpoint to dominant cultures and cultural hegemony (Gramsci 2000; Mayo 1999; Santos 1987). For the CEINAV project the key points were the professionals' voices – captured through focus groups – alongside the narratives we collected from victim-survivors. Michel de Certeau (1984) defines culture as quotidian resistance in social practices – this can highlight the professionals' social representations about the migrant subordinated groups not abiding with the national laws and regulations; culture is also part of the Bourdieu (1989; Bourdieu & Passeron 1964) concept of habitus, where he acknowledges that dominant symbolic structures constrain social practices and yet at the same time, people produce and actualise symbolic and material structures of ways of living and world visions. Despite the difference in perspective to that of Pierre Bourdieu, this resonates with Judith Butler's (1990) argument that gender is performed and actualised in everyday practices and discourses.

The CEINAV team members come from distinct academic fields (education, law, philosophy, social politics, sociology and creative art) and within these, carried certain "baggage", especially understandings of specific concepts. These cultural and academic encounters affected how we approached our data. We explored initially a range of concepts to guide our work – minority, intersectionality, post-colonialism – with each having greater or lesser relevance for the country teams. These debates also confirmed that the concepts of "minority" and "culture" were far from neutral or innocuous: In some academic fields and in some countries, the idea of "minority" sparks divergent reactions. Within certain theoretical traditions, "minority" is mostly associated to benign multiculturalism (Torres 1998) which, in turn, does not reflect the power relations and cultural tensions among different status groups. This criticism became particularly relevant in the "cultural turn" in the 1980s and 1990s, where power relations, discrimination and exploitation of social groups (such as women) found a safe place to affirm cultural differences through a logic of the exotic and othering. In Portugal, the concept of "minority" is not used with regard to oppressed groups: It is unconstitutional to do so. In Germany, the research team talked about women or families belonging to an ethnic or cultural minority or having a migration background. Sometimes the terms disempowered groups, or subordinated groups were used but none of these words or their German equivalents carry the meaning of being located in a subordinate position by others, that is, having "belonging to a devalued group" attributed and in consequence being treated as inferior. In England and Wales the terms black, minority ethnic (BME) or Black, Asian Minority Ethnic and Refugee (BAMER) are widely used in policy and practice circles and the concept of "minoritised" used more recently to indicate the social and political processes involved. For Slovenia this had a specific resonance, since their primary minoritised community is Roma people, for whom issues of race and ethnicity remain matters of debate and discussion.

In the CEINAV project, despite long-lasting working relationships and highly reflective discursivity in the group, we could not reach a consensus across these different un-

derstandings and perspectives. It took us some time not to see this as a failure, but acknowledge that the different positions and perspectives reflect the rich diversity of disciplines and the varying histories of our countries. Pragmatic agreement on unitary concepts would surely have made data analysis simpler, but by recognising the different viewpoints the research is probably more accurate in relation to the intervention cultures as well as to the dilemmas that professionals face.

We, the authors of this chapter, use “minoritised” intentionally here, to highlight that this is a social process, within which there is a default “majority” which invariably has greater access to resources, including the power to define what is normative. Differences are, therefore, not simply variations in practices – such as language, dress, food – but carry hierarchical worth, value and recognition. It is these processes which, in the white majority countries of Europe, mean that “culture” is frequently attributed to others or used to “instruct” those who are not the normative majority how the “culture” of the particular country supposedly is. Awareness of this process was part of our deliberations as a group of white researchers, finding ourselves within this framing, whilst seeking to question and challenge it.

2 Culture clashes

The four countries involved in the study have not just diverse, but to some extent contesting, histories and intellectual engagements with these issues. Whilst the UK and Portugal have documented, and to some extent acknowledged, colonial heritages, this is less the case for Germany, and Slovenia can claim to have been colonised by the Soviet Union. The four countries also have diverse recent engagements and national politics with respect to race and ethnicity.

What this project uncovered were largely unspoken, yet profound, different histories and engagements with issues of race and ethnicity, constructions of majorities and minorities. The depth of these variations is evident in the fact that there seems not to be a shared language (see above) which could accommodate the past and present of four Member States of the European Union, which certainly can be called a cultural encounter in itself.

In this chapter we explore how the issue of culture emerged in the multi-disciplinary focus groups with practitioners that we conducted to each form of violence (see chapter 2 on the methodology). Towards the end of all the 24 focus groups we asked participants whether it would have made a difference for their interventions if the persons in the phased story we discussed before had belonged to a minority or, as the terminology in other languages could be translated back into English, had a migration/migrant background. Our analytic template for working with the data from the focus groups not only included to explore the implicit cultural premises of intervention, including professional and organisational cultures, but also the framing of culture, cultural difference, and the minoritised position of the persons concerned in the interventions. The explicit focus on difficult decisions and dilemmas that practitioners face proved useful in highlighting perceptions of difference.

3 Working with a contested concept

Culture as a concept is complex, contested. The discourse enters an arena of political perspectives both theoretically and practically. Academics and professionals enter a slippery ground seeking to avoid homogenising and stereotypes. At the same time this unease, especially when relating to cultural differences, carries the risk of diluting, or even failing to recognise, how variations in cultural norms affect victim-survivor experiences, and how professionals respond. In this respect culture becomes a discursive resource which can be used in multiple ways in relation to violence against women and/or children: it can be drawn on as an explanation for the violence itself; for how victim-survivors respond; and/or as a reference point for the actions of professionals and agencies.

In the focus groups on domestic violence and on child abuse, the participants were first given a fictive case considered typical and implicitly located in the majority population, and then asked to reflect on what might or should be different if the woman or the family belonged to a minority. Reflections on culture were thus elicited in the context of difference, and while some professionals, especially from the services specialising in violence and abuse, insisted that their response would be no different, experiences of difficulty with access, acceptance of legal norms, or with language were then discussed and understandings of culture as applying to “*them*” rather than “*us*” emerged in all four countries. The focus groups on trafficking for sexual exploitation were presented with the story of a woman from Africa working in prostitution, and the question about “*what would be different*” was aimed at a trafficked woman from an EU country. While the focus groups in England and Wales focused on legal rights, those in Germany discussed cultural dimensions as an important pathway to gaining trust.

Across the different focus groups, culture broadly was described as: norms; ways of living, being and seeing; traditions; mentality; how we form networks and kinships; “codes of understanding”, accepted power relations, and “visions of the world”. That said, when identifying “cultural groups”, or a cultural bond, the concept was sometimes conflated with immigration patterns: in this framing migration was co-terminous with minoritised/subordinated groups. Whilst unsurprising given the current politics of migration in Europe, this led to excluding dominant groups from discussions of culture. This taken for grantedness is the ground on which the process of “othering” can flourish:

“The themes and issues around ethnic-cultural-religious minorities are very complex and interwoven. Migration background is the dominant category of difference. The statistical definition of ‘migration background’ includes 1) anyone who came to Germany after 1949; 2) anyone of foreign nationality; and 3) any German national who has at least one parent who immigrated to Germany or was born as a citizen of another country. The professionals have, however, a different definition of ‘migration background’ and only rarely mention that significant groups such as immigrants from Western Europe do not present any different challenges to intervention than do Germans. While some workshops participants reflect on aspects of the dominant German culture, reference to minorities is always based on migration. Only those who come from another country and have not fully integrated with language and citizenship can be perceived as having a specific or different culture or ethnicity” (Grafe & Hagemann-White 2015).

Professionals, especially those from majority positions, often used culture to refer to those that they perceived as being different and foreign, although this was less the case when support workers themselves had a minority or migration background. By contrast, our interviews with survivors contained a number of explicit narratives of encounters with racism, whilst attributing culture to their communities of origin. This complexity reflects the global politics of ethnicity, and tends towards a neo-colonial rather than a decolonised concept of culture.

Introduced as a potential into the focus group discussions, culture, therefore, appeared to offer an opportunity to focus on differences rather than similarities. In line with that culture was repeatedly referred to as something “others” have: a tangible basis of difference, different to “our” way – implicitly, sometimes explicitly meaning the “right” way. These cultural differences were discussed through variations in norms, capacities for and understandings of violence, gender relations, family structures and the role/space the family holds within particular groups/communities.

There is a problem with the laws: they do not respect nor understand very well our intrusion ... They have many prejudices culturally; they do not ... They are socialised differently from us. (police, DV, Portugal)

Yes, with the Romani, for example, it does show that it's another culture. Also the women from Albania – that's another cultural environment, too. Every woman that comes from another country, really. (NGO, DV, Slovenia)

We have to be quite versatile but it's a sensitive area but what worries me is that sometimes sensitive areas mean that you look at their culture, their colour more than look at the safeguarding issues. (midwife, CAN, England/Wales)

The emphasis on differences varied somewhat across the four countries, with a sense of unreflected superiority surfacing rather frequently, most clearly expressed by some participants in Portugal and Slovenia, with neo-colonial tones evident in the former and nationalism in the latter. In all four countries culture was typically located “over there” rather than “in here”: majority cultures were the unstated, presumed normative referent. Exceptions could, for example, be found in focus groups in England and Wales as well as Germany, where some time was spent critically engaging with, and problematising, the concept of culture, including an explicit discomfort with the potential of homogenising and stereotyping communities or reflecting on the grounds on which it was appropriate to intervene in the lives of people with different origins and heritage. In contrast, however, in other focus groups in England and Wales participants were preoccupied with cultural difference among recent migrants, who needed to be “educated” on parenting and childcare.

It's about educating the people when they come here about how they can discipline their children in the correct and safe way. (teacher, CAN, England/Wales)

There were reflections on the need to respect diversity when intervening against violence and abuse. In Germany, “migration sensitivity” is a policy and professional concept (Jagusch et al. 2012) that clearly influenced attitudes in the fields of child abuse and neglect and domestic violence, but was less salient in the focus groups on trafficking. This orientation was also evident in some discussions about safeguarding in England and Wales.

Of course, the approach has to be different, of course, you have to begin with asking, and accepting that they grew up quite differently. (headmaster primary school, CAN, Germany)

You have to be sensitive to culture but you can't work differently with different cultures ... and it doesn't matter where you're from – if you're from Africa or Lithuania ... so you might work differently with families around what is acceptable there and what is acceptable here but you still focus on the child. (statutory sector social worker, CAN, England/Wales).

And there are special structures in the family which you have to discover first of all. I ask many questions, too, how is this going and how would it be in your country and so on, to understand it. (guardian ad litem, CAN, Germany)

“Other” cultures were sometimes homogenised. For example, the “French culture” was described as “cute” in a Slovenian focus group. Often minority groups were described as hyper-patriarchal, meaning that women and children would be less likely to name or question abuse.

The analysis that follows is not aimed at comparison or generalisation, but aims to illustrate the discursive tensions present in the focus groups. That we present evidence of othering processes does not mean that these were shared by all professionals across the four countries. There were challenges and debates: the tensions reveal the conflicts within discursive formations. For example, in Portugal there was a clear division and tension between a more racist view of the Roma people, when one professional (teacher) stated that Roma regarded gypsy rules as above national Portuguese law, and a more educated, rigorous and humanised view from other professionals (teachers included) who had taken time to get to know and interact with Roma people. These professionals brought new and challenging information to the group, including that there were Roma women activists on domestic violence and that in some areas positive relationships with the police were developing.

4 What makes the difference in “cultural difference”?

In this section we explore how differences were articulated around parenting in relation to child maltreatment and gender relations with references to domestic violence.

A perception that minoritised families had different approaches to parenting was evident across the focus groups in Slovenia, Portugal and Germany, with some variation in England and Wales. The perceived differences orbited around the acceptance of the use of violence as punishment and discipline. Values and principles towards parenting were questioned as to whether they were in line with universal children’s rights or “our” norms in the particular country. These perceptions were linked to family structures, both in terms of who holds legitimised power and influence and the cultural significance of the family. For many this was connected to fathers having an uncontested position at the top of a hierarchical pyramid of power.

Yes, there are some Islamic laws according to which the father automatically gets sole parental rights when the child turns two. Of course, we don’t approve that but it obviously has become firmly rooted in his [the father’s] mind. (family court judge, CAN, Germany)

Culturally, using the whip did not have a negative connotation in that African country. That is, the father did that because of cultural tradition, what is clearly shocking for us, but he hadn’t, let us say, the emotional disaffection in the relationship with his son. On the contrary, he liked his son very much ... He said things like “If [my son] doesn’t fear me, he will not respect me” ... It is a wrong model of beliefs. (social worker, CAN, Portugal)

Such knowledge of conflicts in terms of social norms created tensions for professionals in relation to intervention: there seemed to be a clear orientation that respecting cultural differences should not divert from the right of every child to non-violent upbringing. The is-

sue of whether mothers and fathers should have choices with regard to same-sex case workers was explored, as a rejection of a worker on this ground left the professionals uneasy, some rejected the preferences whereas others acquiesced if it enabled engagement.

Difference was also located in gender relations, and here it was power that men held within interpersonal relationships and communities which was foregrounded. That gender inequality is recognised on a global scale, and domestic violence sits within this, was not the reference point for these discussions. Cultural differences were then attributed to more pronounced unequal gender relations, with a subtle polarity of hyper-patriarchy (them) versus recognised (if not always fulfilled) norms of gender parity (us) emerging. This framing can provide a space in which the household gender regimes that underpin domestic violence in the majority culture are not subject to scrutiny, at the same time as suggesting that minoritised women were more likely to understand men's practices as legitimate.

The vulnerability of the Gypsy community has to do with the total absence of the role of the woman as a person. (magistrate, DV, Portugal)

There are cases where the men lack an understanding of what they are doing as wrong ... for them what they do is not wrong. They just execute their right ... they feel entitled to beat their wife, to correct her. ... Maybe it was that way at home in Egypt, in Iraq, in Syria and now here in Germany, of course, it is a completely different life. (prosecutor, DV, Germany)

Tensions within focus groups were also expressed within contrasting perspectives on women from marginalised groups: in focus groups on domestic violence, some professionals discussed the submissive, passive and subjugated role of Roma women, whereas other professionals highlighted their self-esteem and agency, in the family and the economic sphere.

These observations about patriarchal masculinity sit somewhat uneasily with research on perpetrators in the UK and Germany, where a sense of male entitlement is evident, and in which their actions are routinely minimised (Kelly & Westmarland 2016).

Such framings could influence how participants interpreted their experiences when they encountered cultural groups that did not adhere to national legal frameworks, or even rejected them outright. In Slovenia, the place of origin led to a hierarchy as to who was obeying the law better within minoritised groups, with those from other parts of former Yugoslavia at one end of the scale and Roma, seen as acting in a parallel legal system, at the other. This “lawlessness” was discussed, predominantly by participants from the law enforcement and justice system, in terms of not wanting to integrate, as an “active” rejection and even rebuke of national law, with limited reflection of why there might be either distrust of state agencies or reasons for creating autonomous structures.

If we talk only about the citizens of former Yugoslavia, we take it that they've adopted the basic civilisation norms, approximately the same civilisation norms – and I think that ... Although they don't see us, the system, as their own – the Albanians, for example, don't accept certain of our rules. (prosecutor, CAN, Slovenia)

One variant on this theme, most evident in discussions in Germany and Slovenia, was a sense that some communities had become “closed systems”, with an underlying assumption that there was a responsibility on minoritised groups to open up. In comparison, how closed or uninviting majority cultures might be to those whom they have designated “others” was rarely explored; it came into view most clearly when women were prevented from speaking with a professional unless accompanied by the religious authority of the community. There are implications here for women and children isolated through violence and abuse, whose access to support is narrowed internally and externally. It is this reality

which has led some activists to create and campaign for support services that are rooted in marginalised communities, whilst raising critical issues about rights and equality within them.

Who it is really difficult with is, yes, with Russians, Kasakhs, Bulgarians, Romanians, Sinti, Roma, they are closed systems ... Where the youth welfare office sits together with us, different NGOs, management and says: there's this little house ... there are often very strange living conditions, too. Closed, closed shop, closed system, you can't get in. (NGO, social Worker, ongoing service, CAN, Germany)

There's another difference: in the Romani world, within their population, violence is the appropriate mode of disciplining a woman. (social worker, DV, Slovenia)

4.1 Violence as normal

The view that violence was normal in some social groups was especially evident in the domestic violence focus groups: a trope repeated across countries and professional groupings was that women from different cultural and political contexts could be desensitised to, or ignorant about, violence and abuse. This argument drew on a notion of habituation, subtly different to the ways in which abuse can become normalised within gender relations, which has been long a focus in domestic violence research.

Because they've been raised in this way since a very young age, and it's completely normal that they're restricted in all they can do. (police officer, DV, Slovenia)

They are socialised differently from us; so, they accept very well, and women accept very well the violence. (police, DV, Portugal)

One version of this was to position minoritised women and children as less knowledgeable: that they did not know that they were being abused or alternatively that abuse was wrong. This is a revealing assertion, as it positions majority culture women and children, and importantly professionals, as the knowers, those who can educate others. There were professionals across the focus groups on domestic violence who argued that minoritised, and especially migrant, women did not perceive men's actions as wrong, that they accepted legitimacy for men to correct and punish. Participants in England and Wales and Germany spoke more about women not knowing about rights to protection and support services. This indicates indistinct contours and confusion between on the one side resigned coping, because there is no belief that women have the right or power to end violence, and an acceptance that male violence is legitimate on the other. It also reflects the necessity to be sensitive about different levels of knowledge and agency to claim own rights and the accessibility of support when women make a choice to change their situation – which could be contested as being an issue of culture or minority.

There was some, albeit limited, recognition of the ways in which minoritised women might have more ambivalent positions on intervention which were rooted in the realities of social and institutional racism: for Muslim women, Islamophobia might lead to more reluctance to report to the police, and for women from African-Caribbean communities, not wanting to compound the over policing and criminalisation of young black men. The effects of intervention on family relationships were an issue some participants saw as most relevant to Muslim women and children.

4.2 Exploitation as social mobility

In all but England and Wales participants in the focus groups on trafficking talked about some women's understandings of what had happened to them as not necessarily being trafficking or abuse. This was attributed to the idea that women's lives/situations were so bad in their country of origin that trafficking offered a possibility of escape, a form of social mobility. The focus groups in Portugal also evoked stereotypes about African women: the notion that they have different relationships with their bodies and attitudes towards sex. In England and Wales a stereotype of Indian women as more manipulative was voiced. The racist connotation in these views was not reflected on nor contested by other focus group members.

In one of the German focus groups professionals explored whether cultural norms primed some women to adapt passively to the coercion within trafficking. In addition, cultural practices could serve to entrap even when identified as a victim of trafficking: an example here was the ways in which Nigerian women are often bound by voodoo rituals which makes it difficult for them to imagine being free of exploitation and exploiters. The ways in which culture shapes survival strategies was understood to make intervention, especially offering realistic and practical alternatives, a challenge for practice.

From childhood on the girls constantly get the message: the man has the authority, and if father says: You're going with second cousin Ali to Germany and will earn your money there, then that's just how it is. They don't resist, because they have never learned how. And it is really hard to get through to them, you can't break through the system. We Germans don't understand this very well. (police, TSE, Germany)

German and Portuguese professionals drew distinctions around victims of trafficking from Europe and women from further afield, including Africa, South East Asia or Latin America. Here, European women were framed as having more social and cultural capital in terms of understandings or familiarity with European contexts. Linking this to broader discourse from across the focus groups and forms of violence, professionals first framed women as “*not knowing*” based on cultural heritages, and yet, in comparing European with third country nationals, those from Europe were accorded more knowledge. The possibility that there are degrees of othering, and that this turns on race/ethnicity cannot be ignored here.

4.3 Working appropriately with diversity

Across all four countries focus group participants reflected on the complexities of working with women and families from minoritised groups. At the core of these complexities was how to navigate the perceived cultural differences outlined above, in so far as they may shape the approach, and possibly influence judgement and course of action. These reflections outlined the professional dilemmas and raised questions about what best practice might look like.

One clear example here was discussed in terms of the tensions between different cultural approaches to parenting, and official national frameworks for child protection. The dilemma was in acknowledging that physical violence towards children may form part of cultural norms and practices, yet this created a question about “*holding the line*” in terms of national policies on children's rights and the law. In Portugal this was described as a debate on children's rights versus cultural rights, and it was explicitly stated by some that professionals had to be more tolerant of child physical abuse because of cultural difference. A similar dilemma was articulated with respect to domestic violence being more acceptable in some cultural groups.

The principle must be that nobody is allowed to be violent towards another person. Full stop. This is what we have to insist on. We can consider the actions of a father who punished his daughter in good faith by beating her senseless because she went out with a boy as a social explanation of why he did it perhaps, but we should process it as a criminal offence. (prosecutor, CAN, Slovenia)

It's important for professionals in an area ... to have an understanding of the issues in different ethnic groups, you know, this particular ethnic group tends to behave in that way, and so on ... but then to keep in one's mind always that the important, that the key issue is the safety of the children concerned and while it's all very well for them to follow their cultural norms or whatever but they should never ever come above the safety of the child. (midwife, CAN, England/Wales)

Holding the line – maintaining the same standards as set by law and policy – was an ethical reference point for most professionals, but whilst this gave them a safe ground to stand on it did not resolve the question of how to engage in practice.

I would have, how would I have explained to these children bringing them to another place, where nobody speaks their language, where they are basically not cushioned or supported at all, where they don't know what is actually happening, why they are separated from their families? (social worker, social services, CAN, Germany)

4.4 Diversity as a barrier to intervention

Speaking a different language to the national context was the most frequently cited barrier to working with women and families, but a number saw this as compounded by precarious immigration status and material constraints. Different family regimes were also framed as a point of difficulty: the difficulty in “*entering families*” was linked to hyper-patriarchal family structures, with German professionals noting how men in such regimes may refuse to accept women as competent practitioners.

A different thread in these deliberations was that a focus on cultural difference may lead to over-estimating the level of risk in child abuse and neglect and domestic violence based on preconceptions and stereotypes. This can also suggest that there is limited capacity among professionals to understand and deal constructively with the life context of each family. This appeared across countries and forms of violence, particular explicit in Germany where “*cultural sensitivity*” in interventions is a strong professional norm. Whilst most professionals were at pains to stress that intervention methods would be the same, a number of stories were told in which cultural backgrounds hindered successful intervention, or where appropriate intervention required considerably more time and effort to explore the unfamiliar context.

We pigeon-hole people if we want to or not. It switches on automatically; ah yes, the Russians. The Turkish. We don't speak it out loud, but at first we also have it. That we judge the risk to be higher or lower. Because they're more emotional. What we do with this, that is that we have these categories, is not the problem, but how we deal with them. (intervention centre, DV, Germany)

I know that I was startled about that myself, to realise that, that I had really made a difference there. (social worker, social services, CAN, Germany)

In cases of child abuse and neglect where children were removed from their homes, professionals highlighted difficulties in finding new homes which would fit with a child's religious and cultural heritage. Similar difficulties were noted for shelter accommodation

for victims of domestic violence. An interesting contradiction, noted specifically in Portugal, but extending to the other countries, was between the contention that procedures and processes should be the same no matter what the cultural/migration background might be, whilst at other points asserting that every case is unique. The concept of intersectionality – which enables exploration of difference in terms of the matrix of oppression in the lives of children and women – was not drawn on by professionals. Lacking a conceptual framing that can hold similarity and difference simultaneously meant that the focus groups often contained contradictory elements.

4.5 “Removing those barriers”

While discursively culture and cultural differences were frequently discussed within implicitly superior referents, the focus group discussions also contained reflections about how to work more thoughtfully and effectively. Some professionals spoke about the dangers and problems of working with culture in terms of homogenising or stereotyping groups. Here more “*space, time and expertise*” was seen as necessary. What this expertise might look like was seldom specified, but could be linked to other assertions, such as: recognition of material constraints; taking time to explore the history and background of each child, woman or family. This implied an openness in practitioners to not position themselves as the knowers, but to be willing to learn about the meanings, and potential consequences, of courses of action in each context. This could be seen in the idea of removing the barriers to accessing appropriate support. In addition, not overemphasising cultural differences was brought up, through a suggestion that culture should be seen as only one potential lens through which professionals approach women or families. Being curious about the beliefs, self-concepts and cultural belongings of those one is working with has been seen as way to connect to the women, men and children (see also France 2013).

It's about finding ways to enable them to access the service for their benefit. It's seeing where the barriers are in place, whether that be language or cultural issues, and removing those barrier. (specialist NGO, DV, England/Wales)

I think there's a little bit of a danger when you place issues of culture or ethnicity in such other separate categories. You move away from the fact that when you have a child in a family you might have a series of lenses that you have to approach looking at the child or working with the family through. (lawyer, CAN, England/Wales)

Another route proposed by some was being able to pair victim-survivors with professionals from similar cultural heritages. The same benefits were outlined in terms of professional training being delivered by members of the relevant community.

Overall I would find important, I think this is important for every advice and support service, when there is much contact with migrants, that people with a migration background of their own join the team. And if it is possible, that services are offered in the mother tongue. (lawyer, DV, Germany)

A development of this theme was provided by a specialist NGO from England/Wales, which works with black and ethnic minority women. Their approach was based on enabling women, the focus not on cultural difference, but on challenges for support and intervention. Here there were additional barriers to accessing support which it is the responsibility of agencies to dismantle. This creates extra layers to the work, which included:

building trust, particularly around confidentiality; enabling women to access support where options are more limited because of immigration status; recognising the complexities of family and community connections where these are associated with honour and shame. One method was to ask women additional questions about what their community norms were, in order that practitioners could understand if barriers could, where possible, be dismantled.

So as a family law solicitor, my advice on legal remedies is exactly the same regardless of where they're from. I'd ask different questions – being alive to the specific issues that those women face, not so much because that will affect the legal remedies, but more so that I can understand her case and to be able to present it to the judge properly, to be able to advocate for her properly – If they're from an ethnic minority background, try to understand their case, but the actual legal remedies would be exactly the same. My difficulty is that they can't access me. (lawyer, DV, England/Wales)

And there are special structures in the family which you have to discover first. I also ask a lot of questions, how is this going and how would it be going in your country and stuff like that, to understand. (guardian ad litem, CAN, Germany)

5 Reflections

Culture was an ambiguous term in the theoretical discussions in the CEINAV project and remained as such when exploring our data. Culturalising the situation of the persons concerned can, on the one hand, lead to stereotyping and justification of discriminatory views. On the other hand it can help the persons concerned explain themselves, their beliefs and needs as well as the understanding of professionals to find the appropriate intervention for the individual situation. The tensions and interrelations were strikingly present in the discussions on culture in our research. They obviously call for permanent reflections. The complexity and dilemmas which in particular the focus groups revealed led us to conclude that the professional trope of “cultural competence” is insufficient in the effort to ensure that all women and children who experience abuse have equal access to support and protection. The insights from the focus groups, alongside interviews with survivors, form the foundation for the ethical framework for intervention developed out of the CEINAV project (see chapter 16).

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